Sidran's concert is rich and real

By DAVE WAGNER
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By the time they closed up shop at the Church Key Tuesday night, Ben ("Doc") Sidran had proven that he is the definitive smoker in these parts. To say it was an "up" concert is ridiculous understatement: it went to the heart and bone. It was rich and real; it moved and cooked; it had the collective eardrum banging with an understanding of what was being accomplished.

Lest this all sound like merely puffy enthusiasm, I'll lay the groundwork.

Just about a year ago Sidran played in the same hall under similar circumstances. He had just released his first album on the Arista label (entitled "Free in America") and was concluding the Eastern leg of a national tour to promote it. Tuesday night he was back again, another album up ("The Doctor Is In," also on Arista) but with a more modest tour schedule and a smaller band. This time there was no Curley Cooke on lead guitar; in fact, there was no lead guitar at all. There was saxophonist David Woodford, bassist Gary Zappa (both from last year's tour), and a new drummer by the name of Bill Meeker who knocked heads together.

There's no accounting for moments of magic in jazz or anything else since, it seems, more than good musicianship — like skilled labor, a cheap commodity at the moment — is required for it. It seems rather to depend on vague, telepathic and accidental qualities, like the energy between pianist Sidran and drummer Meeker for this concert. Meeker's approach to the drum line was like an endlessly boiling kettle or a controlled prairie fire (accented by a hokey but weirdly effective splash cymbal in the early '50s style) — and it was burning directly

Ben Sidran

under Sidran's chair. Though no one could see the band throughout the second and third sets because the lights went out, the audience could visualize the fire in the Sidran-Meeker exchanges. Ben, on his albums and in most concerts a private soul, given to jazz as reflection rather than eruption, was breathing fire over this drum line.

If, as one local jazz critic speculated, it takes a first-rate drummer to bring out the iridescence in Sidran, Meeker is the man to do it. This, moreover, is speaking of a pianist who has had better than average luck with drummers, both locally and on his tours. In fact, his latest album features none other than Tony Williams in two of the more ambitious cuts (the homages to Horace Silver and Thelonius Monk in, respectively, "Silver's Serenade" and "Good Bye Pork Pie Hat"). Sidran apparently won the attention of Williams, who became famous while working with Miles Davis and is clearly one of the top three jazz drummers on the planet, as the producer of Williams' own "The Old Bum's Rush" on Polydor. (Sidran is a versatile guy; along with his own recordings he produces those of others, including on occasion their TV shows as well). For that matter, bassist Richard Davis, who in the fall will be a newly tenured professor in the UW music faculty and leader of Jimmy Cheatham's old Black Music Ensemble, is featured in the same two cuts.

Still, even with the brilliant Williams in the backup, Sidran's solos on the new album are meditative compared with the long, stretched-for lines he gave the audience Tuesday night. Take the most popular song on the new album, "Song for a Sucker Like You." Like many of Sidran's best songs, it's an ironic (even cynical) backwards glance by someone who's Been There and no longer cares where "There" is. The salt and pepper are there in the album, but with Meeker in the live version, the irony turns to a slashing, burning, give-'em-hell attack on two-bit illusions; the proof came when Sidran played it the second time around, very much up-tempo, with startling energy rebounding against Meeker's idiosyncratic cymbal work.

This went on all evening. Woodford on sax gave his perfect counterpoint to Sidran with biting phrases that quoted from '50s rock as much as from his own imagination. No lead guitar was necessary, and the lack of it seemed to unhamper Sidran as a soloist. There was more jazz than rock. There was more Sidran than music industry. During the last set, when Madisonian Dick Drake (he of Fat Richard and the Chicago Daily Blues All-Stars, who goes back to the Old Days of Sidran, Scaggs and Miller) got up with his tenor sax and blew dirty, there was a sense that the 300 or more who were crowding into the bar to welcome home a friend were getting the real news at last. Sidran had whipped off his T-shirt, cracking jokes about starting "a chain of rock 'n roll saunas" because of the intense heat in the place, and gave the crowd what it had come for.

After the show was over, I asked a dripping Sidran why so many of the songs on his new album were concerned with passing on advice to young people who want to "make it" in the music industry. "Get It Yourself," "See You on the Other Side" and "Be Nice" (which concludes with an aside, "It'll never be a hit") all have the same didactic concern about illusions of stardom, as though Sidran were passing on what he had learned, by moving back to Madison to raise a family and to live as a craftsman rather than a super-nova like Boz Scaggs. **"Well," he said, "I don't know anybody who's writing songs about real life, and my real life is the music business."** It's the attitude that gives his new album its sense of immediacy, both on the more popular side and on the serious, driving jazz cuts. It's growth. It's Sidran being straight with us.